

HEART WORK

103

Personal Spiritual Formation

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WELCOME TO “**Heart Work: Personal Spiritual Formation,**” the third course of the new REAL Training. Our participation in this training reveals four important characteristics that are probably integral components of our lives and souls. First, we love and follow Jesus and long to see others love and follow him. Second, we have hearts for the women in our lives, churches and communities. Third, we feel called to use our experiences and God-given gifts in some form of ministry with these women. And fourth, we desire either new skills that might better equip us for ministry or tools that might sharpen the skills we have been using. If these characteristics are true of us, then one other thing is also more than likely true. We are eager to get started! We cannot wait to learn some new concepts, apply them in our spheres of influence and then see what God has in store. We want to be active participants in the Great Commission!

However, before we head out with new ideas and tools, we might want to heed the words of a woman who has been in ministry for over thirty years. In a research survey of women in ministry ten or more years, this wise veteran expressed the view of the entire research group. “...We need to remember, and then keep reminding each other, that it isn’t about

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what we are doing. It's about our relationship with Christ. We need to operate out of a full cup and not become empty vessels. I think we really need to find our security in Christ because ministry will either beat you up or feed your ego and neither one is very healthy if we depend on it too much." Her summary statement was this: "Take care of your souls."

Without the presence and power of the Spirit of Christ in our lives, we cannot live the life He has for us or do the work He has given to us.

This is the purpose of "**Heart Work: Personal Spiritual Formation**"—to remember and remind us again that our relationship with Christ is the most important element of our lives and, as an extension of our lives, our ministry. Our relationship with Jesus is and will be the most important part of any ministry to which He calls us. Without his presence and power in our lives we cannot live the life He wants for us or do the work He has given to us. That bears repeating. **Without the presence and power of the Spirit of Christ in our lives, we cannot live the life He has for us or do the work He has given to us.** We will be "empty vessels" that are either burned out or puffed up. And most tragic of all, we might become women who no longer experience the loving, forgiving, healing, exciting life promised to all who call him "Abba Father." It behooves us then to take care of our souls.

What To Expect

In the following pages, we are going to explore together some basic concepts, habits, and disciplines that will hopefully remind us to pursue a vibrant relationship with Jesus before and during our journey on the path He has set before us. We are blessed beyond measure to have the words of Jesus and the lives of thousands of saints to direct our steps. Together, with the leading and power of our Savior, let us learn from them.

How We Will Proceed

We will explore five different verbs— **dwell, listen, beware, accept and persevere**—fleshing out their meanings and looking inside them for what God might want to say to us about living in relationship with him. Each exploration will be followed by an exercise section that will allow us to pursue and interact with different aspects of the verb. Be prepared to carve out some time for processing; after all, our relationships with Jesus are fluid and dynamic, needing time and space for growth. Exploring how to make Christ our focus will not accomplish much if we merely accumulate ideas without allowing them to find purchase in our hearts. Most importantly, ask God to speak. He alone has the words that can give us life—his life, eternal life, abundant life.

*Most importantly,
ask God to speak.*

Things You Will Need

A Bible—it might be helpful to have several translations at hand.

A journal—nothing fancy, just something for capturing your thoughts.

A quiet place—one as free of distractions as possible.

An open heart and mind.

Let's begin!

Dwell

“I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer...Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me. I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing.” John 15. 1, 4-5, The Message

This past May, my husband and I had the privilege of spending some time in Sequoia National Park. We had never seen these giants of the forest and were astounded at their height and girth—200+ feet high and 30+ feet in diameter. What magnificent creations! How did they grow to be so huge? What conditions in this particular part of the earth created the en-

vironment for trees to reach these proportions? As we listened to the park rangers and read the information available, we began to understand that altitude, longitude, latitude, moisture from the Pacific Ocean, temperature, soil composition, sunlight and even forest fires all played a part in nurturing the sequoias in this very small area, resulting in the largest trees on the planet.

We also witnessed an amazing example of how even more specific locations and conditions affected growth. In the 1950's, forestry experts achieved a long desired goal of growing the first sequoia saplings and planting them in the park, attempting to repopulate some of the thousands of trees that had been carelessly harvested in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Within an area less than an acre, all the trees were 50 years old but they varied drastically in size. Some appeared to be 5 years old, some more like 200 years old but all had been planted at the same time. What happened? What caused some trees to grow bigger and faster than others when they were within feet of each other? The answer was found in one phrase: amount of sunlight and water. If a sapling was planted in a spot that received even a little more sunlight and water than another, that baby tree grew more quickly than its neighbor. Because of this important factor, two trees of the same age planted right next to each other appeared to have been planted hundreds of years apart. Once we understood this truth, we looked around and saw it repeated over and over among these young trees. The dwelling place of the tree, the place where it was rooted, and its exact location determined how richly it was nourished, which then determined how much and how quickly it could grow.

In John 15, Jesus tells us that our dwelling place, our source of life, our exact location for nourishment is the spot where we're connected to the Vine. We are the branches; He is the Vine. Our only hope for the sustenance that gives us life is our connection with the source of life. The Message uses the phrases "live in me," "make your home in me," "joined with me," to articulate this connection, and it describes the relationship between Christ and his branches as "intimate and organic." Other translations use the words "dwell," "remain," "abide"—all great words that give us an idea of what it means to be attached to the Vine. Jesus goes on to illustrate that as we are living in him, making our home in him, joining with him, remaining in him, abiding in him, dwelling in him, He is living

in us, making his home in us, joining with us, remaining in us, abiding in us, dwelling in us. We live in him; He lives in us! What a glorious, mysterious, abundant **LIFE!**

All we have to do is stay connected to Jesus. That seems fairly simple. All we have to do is stay connected to Jesus. Shouldn't be too hard. Stay connected to Jesus. Got it. Well, I hate to burst your bubble but I've been walking with Jesus over 40 years and have been in ministry over 30 years and I can honestly say that staying connected to Jesus has been the hardest part of the journey. It has been way too easy to get caught up in the work, the expectations, the needs and the demands of ministry. It has been way too easy to try to do it out of my own power, to forget that the source of my life, let alone ministry, is Jesus. So staying connected to him, dwelling in him, living in him and He in us needs to be our highest priority. Because you'll notice that Christ has another word of truth about remaining in him: "Separated, you can't produce a thing." Or as the NIV states, "Apart from me, you can do nothing." Nothing. Without the life-giving attachment to the vine, we have no nourishment and we wither and die. Picture a little sequoia sapling lying on its side with its roots out of the soil. It will not produce; it will not grow; it will not survive. Neither will we.

Exercise #1

Venture outside and find a healthy, growing tree (or shrub or other type of plant). Look at its branches. Notice how they are connected to the main trunk. Do some have more leaves or blossoms or fruit than others? If so, is there a noticeable difference in their attachment to the trunk? Are there broken branches, partially severed branches, damaged branches? Follow these branches from the trunk to the tip. What do you see? Spend some time with this wonderful image—our complete dependence on the life of Jesus flowing from him into us.

Exercise #2

The following words and phrases come from various translations of the John 15 text and dictionary definitions of these words. Spend some time reflecting on each word or phrase, placing it in the text of John 15, and noticing how it influences the meaning of the text. Write in your journal anything that strikes you as insightful or significant for your life.

Abide (dwell, remain, last) in me
I (Jesus) abide (dwell, remain, last) in you
Dwell (reside, exist, linger, keep attention directed) in me
I dwell (reside, exist, linger, keep attention directed) in you
Remain (stay after others have gone) in me
I remain (stay after others have gone) in you
Live (be alive, conduct one's life) in me
I live (am live, conduct one's life) in you
Make your home in me
I make my home in you
Join (form a unit) with me
I join (form a unit) with you
Intimate (innermost, very close familiarity, warm friendship) relationship with me
My intimate (innermost, very close familiarity, warm friendship) relationship with you
Organic (derived from living things) relationship with me
My organic (derived from living things) relationship with you

Exercise #3

Rewrite John 15:1, 4-5 using your own words and phrases from Exercise #2. Perhaps it is more personal now.

Listen

“I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When He has brought out all his own, He goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.” John 10. 1-5, NIV

I met my husband at a Young Life camp in Minnesota in July 1970.

We were both college students from different parts of Colorado and were there to work on the summer staff, he as the town driver, maintenance man and musician and I as the assistant work crew boss. (In other words, he had the keys to the pop machines and I cleaned a lot of toilets!) Camp was a wonderful place to develop a relationship; there were many opportunities to talk deeply about our lives and no pressure to “date.” And we did talk! By the end of that month, we felt we know each other well enough to agree to spend more time together once we returned to Colorado.

Then a strange thing happened. Because of prior commitments, Dick (my future husband) left the camp two weeks before I did and called me after a few days had elapsed. There was only one phone on which summer staff could receive calls so I was summoned to that phone by another staff member who said, “Dick Schultz is on the phone for you.” I eagerly put the receiver to my ear—and heard a voice I didn’t recognize! This voice coming over the wire was not the voice of the young man I had come to know at camp. This voice kept saying he was that same guy but I could not believe it; it just didn’t sound like him. It took almost five minutes before he used a phrase that I definitely knew was something Dick would say. Then I believed; Dick was on the line!

We have been married 37 years now and I would recognize my husband’s voice anywhere at any time through any phone under any circumstances. I know his voice. I know it well. But in 1970 I did not know it well enough to recognize it over the phone.

How well do we know our shepherd’s voice? Jesus tells us in John 10 that his followers, his sheep, will know his voice, will not be fooled by a stranger’s voice, will follow his and only his voice. How well do we know his voice?

In **The Pursuit Of God**, A.W. Tozer tells us this about God’s voice: “A word is a medium by which thoughts are expressed, and the application of the term to the eternal Son leads us to believe that self-expression is inherent in the Godhead, that God is forever seeking to speak Himself out to His creation. The whole Bible supports this idea. God is speaking. Not God spoke, but GOD IS SPEAKING. He is, by His nature, continuously articulate. He fills the world with His speaking voice.”

God is continually speaking. Are we hearing? Are we able to tune out

all the other voices, within and without, recognize the Shepherd's voice and follow him? As we walk with Jesus on the path He has given us, how do we learn to hear and know his voice? It appears that we need to acquire a posture of listening. What might help us acquire that? How have other Christ followers achieved such a posture? What common threads run through the lives of those who intimately know the voice of God?

Commonalities

Regular Devotions: People who seem to know the Savior's voice well spend regular with him. They spend time praying, reading scripture and studying what they read. They may have a daily or every other day or weekly devotional time but they have this time regularly. They may incorporate music or liturgical readings; they may interact with nature; they may read devotional literature; they may keep a prayer journal. What people do or use in their devotional times varies from person to person, from tradition to tradition, from culture to culture and from century to century. But one thing is consistent—saints who intimately know the voice of Jesus spend regular time with him. And they do so time after time, week after week, year after year. In this manner, they place themselves in a posture of listening.

Solitude and Silence: Brothers and sisters who live in a listening posture with Christ practice the art and discipline of solitude and silence. This is not easy in our busy world. We do not live in a culture that values or encourages solitude and/or silence. With all the technology available today, most of us are bombarded by noise, demands, activities, and interruptions 24/7. We rarely think about, create or plan times to be alone and quiet. As a result, we are losing sight of how important these two conditions are for fostering a heart that hears the Shepherd's voice. In the din of our daily lives, we cannot distinguish his voice from those of strangers, robbers and thieves because we have not quieted our bodies or minds or hearts enough to begin to separate his voice from those of others.

Howard Baker, in his book *Soul Keeping*, writes, "For those seeking God's voice in the chaos of living, silence and solitude form the path on which we learn to surrender our self...When we open up space for God in silence and solitude, we take the teeth out of the busyness that would chew us up."

Scripture is filled, cover to cover, with accounts of ordinary people becoming transformed saints because they spent time alone and quiet with the God of the universe. The gospels tell us over and over of Emmanuel, God in the flesh, getting away from others and being silent with his Abba. If we hope to live lives that reflect the face of Jesus, if we hope to be women with vibrant relationships with the risen Christ, then we too need to have regular, frequent experiences of solitude and silence.

We must all find the ways to be alone and silent that work for us. We must find the times and places that allow us to be truly alone and completely quiet, internally and externally. We need to try and fail and try again. It's like the first vacations we took as a married couple; we had a couple of real losers but we didn't give up. We had to learn how to take vacations together. Now, we excel at it. But it took practice. It took trying until we figured it out for us. It is the same with this most intimate time with Christ; we need to keep trying until we figure out how to do it for ourselves.

Rest: *“By the seventh day God had finished the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done.”* Genesis 2:2-3, NIV

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work....” Exodus 20:8-10

Men and women who hear the voice of Christ understand, respect and practice true Sabbath rest. Without physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual rest we short circuit! We resemble circus performers, running from place to place, trying to keep multiple plates spinning in the air. And eventually we can't keep up and all the plates come crashing down around us. God knows that we have a tendency to be plate spinners! He has to command us to rest—for our own benefit! He wants us to have consistent, weekly times of complete rest; notice his command involves doing no work—none at all—at least one full day every week. In his heart, this is not an option.

For people involved in ministry, this is extremely difficult. We tend to think that the work of God will not continue if we take a break. After all, He called us to do his work so He must intend for us to work without

ceasing! (Pray without ceasing—yes; work without ceasing does not seem to be Biblical!) In a wonderful book titled *Sabbath*, Wayne Muller proposes that true Sabbath rest is ceasing work for a period of time whether the work is finished or not. This is the reason that Old Testament Israelites began Sabbath at the moment of sundown and did not resume work until the next setting of the sun. The work was not finished but Sabbath began, progressed and completed its appointed span of time anyway. What a concept—resting when the work is not done! And what a difficult thing for us twenty-first century women to do! Yet it is clear from God himself that we are to rest, completely and regularly, in the midst of unfinished labor. Without Sabbath rest, we will become numb to his voice.

Other: We are blessed, blessed, blessed to have libraries and book stores filled with books written about and by thousands of men and women who have heard and followed the voice of Jesus. We live in a time when we can download, purchase or rent significant workshops, sermons, books and Bible studies by that “great cloud of witnesses” from centuries past and present day, from all life circumstances, from all cultures and traditions. As we continue our unique journey of knowing and following Christ, we may find that resources such as these aid in the development of our ability to hear him.

And finally, one additional way to learn to listen for the voice of God is to heed the words of those who love him and are present in our every day lives. We all know men and women who are deeply connected to Jesus, who are wise and discerning, and who have much to tell us about the Savior. They often speak the heart of God; we will be wise to listen.

Exercise #1

Read 1 Kings 19:11-13 and journal about the following questions:

- What circumstances in your life have created despair and discouragement similar to Elijah's?
- What personal encounters with God have been similar to an earthquake, a mighty wind and/or a fire?
- One translation of verse 12 refers to “a gentle stillness.” When have you heard the Spirit of God speak to you in this way?

Exercise #2

Carve out a segment of time—one hour, two hours, a half day (morning or afternoon), a full day—whatever is possible for you. Get away from people and noise as much as possible. This will give you the solitude. The harder part will be the silence. Plan nothing for that time—no scripture to read or study, no prayer list, no music, no devotional readings—nothing. Let yourself come to that time with no agenda. This will help you eliminate some of your inner noise. You may want to walk or sit out in nature somewhere but do nothing else. Create as much solitude and silence as you can and let God do whatever He wills in that place. Journal about the experience.

Exercise #3

Try one or more of the following:

- Use your time in the car as time for solitude and silence—no radio or cell phones.
- Turn off all phones, computers, music and television one night at home.
- If possible, go outside for a lunch hour and eat your meal alone, being quiet.
- Go for a solitary walk or hike.

Exercise #4

Think and journal about the following:

- Am I truly resting or am I awake with my eyes closed? What is the difference for me?

Exercise #5

Read one or more of the following resources:

- Soul Keeping** by Howard Baker
- The Spirit of the Disciplines** by Dallas Willard
- Sabbath** by Wayne Muller
- Imitation of Christ** by Thomas A Kempis
- The Pursuit of God** by A. W. Tozer

Beware

Throughout my forty years with Christ, I have had innumerable opportunities to hear very gifted speakers address the joys and challenges of leadership and ministry. Almost all have had anointed messages or practical tips yet two have made the most impact on my life; causing me to think deeply and honestly about how I pursue the calling God has placed within me. Both messages contain warnings (thus the verb “beware”) and hope for those of us wanting to be used by God in the lives of those around us. Here are summaries of these messages.

Charge To A Pastor

A few years ago, a friend of ours was being ordained as an EPC pastor after completing all the requirements, passing all the exams, and being approved by our presbytery. He and his Ministry Board designed his ordination service, inviting several pastors to participate in one or more aspects of this important ceremony. One such pastor had been a mentor to our friend for over twenty years and was given the privilege of issuing the charge to this newly ordained minister. His words were so unexpected and so moving that I took notes, typed them up, and tacked them to my office wall right in front of where I sit every day. They are great reminders of what we need to beware of when we enter into ministry. These are the key phrases, in order of presentation, from this wise man.

“Be careful if you have talent for ministry; it can be dangerous for you. The more talent you have, the more dangerous it can be.”

What is so dangerous about having talent for ministry? God gives us gifts and talents and wants us to use them for his purposes—what’s so harmful about that? Think back to our discussion about the Vine. Our tendency as flawed human beings is to attempt to change ourselves and the world around us by and from our own strengths. Once we weaken or lose our connection to the life-giving Vine of Jesus, we lose all power and all perspective. We begin to think we really have something of our own to offer—God’s gift to our church, God’s agent for reaching the world. We lean less on him and more on ourselves and become less and less effective for kingdom building. We forget that the work is his, not ours, and lose the only power by which eternal change is possible. As bearers of the

gospel, we are uniquely privileged to witness and participate in the moving of his Spirit. To be “in the ministry” is to have the joy of watching Christ at work in the hearts and lives of men and women He brings our way. If we lose sight of this truth, God’s ministry through us is diminished and our spiritual well being is threatened. So, yes, talent for ministry can be dangerous indeed.

“What is inside us is infinitely more dangerous than anything the world may throw at us.” Spend some time with anyone who has been in ministry for any length of time and you will find that they have not been exempt from the difficulties, trials or sorrows that life tosses at all of us. Pastors and lay ministers as well as Christ-followers in all walks of life have suffered illnesses, tragic deaths, financial stresses, broken relationships, persecutions, human-delivered atrocities, withered dreams, and devastated hopes. Yet as crippling as these external slings and arrows are, they not nearly as dangerous to us as the old nature that continues to occupy the same inner space as the new nature of Jesus. 1 John 1:8 says, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (NIV) Day to day recognition of our broken humanity is essential if we are to walk with Christ in forgiveness and grace. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from

“What is inside us is infinitely more important than anything we say, do or look like.”

all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9 (NIV) Denying or ignoring our brokenness takes us back to Eden where we hide from and lie to the God who longs for us. Our humanity can either be the burden that will render us useless for God’s work or the vehicle through which He will reveal himself to the world.

“What is inside us is infinitely more important than anything we say, do or look like.” Who we are in Christ is the most important identity we have. By the power of the sacrifice of Jesus, we hold in our very

being the Spirit of the living God. He lives in us—miracle of miracles! Nothing is more important than that. As we seek to serve him in whatever ministry lies before us, we may say wonderful things about Jesus, we may do wonderful works in his name, we may even be thought of as wise and loving and influential but we cannot base our identity in activities and acknowledgements. We are daughters of the King, loved by the Father, redeemed by the Son, inhabited by the Spirit. This is who we are and this is what is important!

Dead Leader Running

Wayne Cordeiro, Senior Pastor at New Hope Christian Fellowship on Oahu, spoke at one of the Willow Leadership Summits, describing his own journey into and out of ministry burn out. Dead Leader Running is the perfect description of what happens to many people who are serious about making disciples of all men. As this pastor of a “successful” church in Hawaii has learned, outward achievements can seduce very faithful people into neglecting their vital connection to the Vine, resulting in withered branches that have little true life. In his exploration of his personal spiritual state, he has discovered that there are some significant helps necessary for remaining in the Vine. A life of regular devotions is one such help, as we have already mentioned in the **LISTEN** section. Below are summaries of two additional aids he feels are essential.

Safe Havens: All of us need people with whom we are completely safe, people who listen without judging, who allow us to fail, who encourage us to keep going, who give wise counsel when asked. (Pastor Cordero calls them lightning rods.) The more visible our ministry, the more difficult it is to find these people but find them we must. Without safe havens, we begin to feel that who we are in private is becoming different than who we are in public. Living with this false sense of self can quickly lead to burn out and dying on the Vine. For some, a spouse or intimate friend will be their safe haven; for others, it may be a spiritual director or professional counselor. It does not matter who the person is as long as it is someone in our life! We need safe havens.

Hold Joy: Most of us in ministry have to battle the temptation to let joy leak out of our lives. It seems incongruous that serving the call of Christ can become joyless but it happens over and over again in ministry.

And once our joy is compromised, burn out is close at hand. The tragedy is that we can lose not only our joy in service but we often additionally lose our joy in Jesus himself. Our most important relationship can suffer in deep and debilitating ways. Thus it is vital that we find and hold onto the joy God gives so freely. EXERCISE #5 below may help us evaluate how we are holding onto joy in our journey with Christ.

Matthew 10:16 finds Jesus advising us to be “as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” (NIV) We cannot approach a life of ministry wearing rose-colored glasses. Our spiritual life and growth will be enhanced by recognizing our own areas of danger and taking steps to minimize the damage these areas can cause.

Exercise #1

Journal about the following questions:

- What are your gifts and/or talents that God is calling you to use in ministry and service?
- How are you currently working out of your own strengths as you exercise these gifts/talents?
- How are you currently working out of your connection to the Vine?
- What dangers do you see for yourself in this arena?

Exercise #2

If you do not presently do so, experiment with incorporating a time of confession into your regular devotions. Practice being as honest as possible; then spend time recognizing the forgiveness and cleansing of our Redeemer. As Albert Finney, portraying John Newton in the movie *Amazing Grace* declares, “I am a great sinner. He is a great Savior.” We walk more intimately with Jesus when we live this reality.

Exercise #3

Take a realistic look at the qualities, activities and roles upon which you base your identity and record them in your journal. Notice the ones that are of this world and the ones that are of the Spirit. Let God speak to you about your identity in him.

Exercise #4

Identify the safe havens in your life. If you have none, ask the Lord to help you find at least one. Be intentional about spending time with these people in deep, honest conversation.

Exercise #5

Journal about the following:

- What gives you joy?
- What are you doing when you feel most alive?
- Where and with whom are you doing it?
- What are you doing when you lose track of time?

- What drains you?
- What makes you feel tired or dispirited?

Look at your schedule. Schedule some joy-producers into your week. If possible, schedule some into each day.

Accept

During the first fifteen years of our marriage, my husband was a staff member with Young Life. The focus of this parachurch ministry was (and still is) bringing Christ to high school students using a three-pronged approach: weekly clubs, weekly Bible studies and weekend and summer camping experiences. Several Young Life camps were located just a couple of hours away from our home in Denver, Colorado and adolescents from all over the country descended on these camps to experience a week in the great Rocky Mountains. One of the most significant activities near the end of each week at one particular camp was the hike up Mt. Princeton, one of Colorado's famed "fourteeners"—a mountain over fourteen thousand feet above sea level. Many students climbing that mountain came from significantly lower elevations; many were not used to vigorous exercise; some had physical disabilities; but the goal was for ALL of them to reach the top. Camp staff and counselors knew that this would not be easily achieved; it would require each person to travel at their own pace and more equipped people to help those less equipped. The most moving mo-

ment for everyone was the arrival at the mountain peak of the very last person—because that person NEVER arrived alone. Other campers, other counselors, other staff had walked with that young man or woman all the way, encouraging, assisting and sometimes even carrying him or her. Helping hands had supplied more water and/or food; experienced hikers had suggested times to rest; hundreds of voices had shouted and cajoled and bolstered that camper all the way up. And yes, individuals and groups of stronger students had at times shouldered a person's entire weight, lifted him or her up off the ground and willingly carried them up the mountain when they could not make it on their own strength. The message at the beginning of the hike was always very clear: if one of us doesn't make it, we all fail and we can all make it if we help each other.

These many years later we can still learn some valuable lessons from this hike up Mt. Princeton—all of which are reflected in the word “accept.” The first lesson is this—accept that our life with Christ is a journey. It is not necessarily a straight path. It has twists and turns, uphill and downhill stretches. It has beautiful views and views we'd like to forget. It is sometimes easy and we find ourselves strolling along without a care in the world. At other times it is incredibly strenuous and painfully exhausting, draining us of all ability to even walk another step. We will have seasons when we are surrounded by light and can see the path clearly and seasons when we walk in darkness, unable to discern if the next step will send us over a cliff. We will even have seasons when we can see just fine but the path seems to have disappeared. There will be times of skipping and running and times of sitting down; times of bounding ahead and times of really wanting to quit. Every phase of life, every choice we make, every person we encounter will influence the journey in positive and not so positive ways. And the journey will continue regardless. When we respond to the love of Jesus, we begin a life journey with him. The story of our lives is written during this journey and, because our new lives are eternal, the story has no ending. The journey continues into eternity with Christ. Accept the journey. Allow it to unfold. Recognize the stages and seasons and let them flow. Abundant living will be a reality when we accept the nature of the journey.

The second lesson of the mountain is that we are not meant to journey alone. Not only are we walking with the Spirit but it is God's design

that we share the journey with other brothers and sisters. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 we learn that all of us Christ followers together form one body, that we all are vital to the life of that body, and that we all NEED each other to complete the body. We cannot make it to the top of the mountain without help. Joyous travel will be more likely if we accept this fact—we NEED each other. Western culture does not embrace this well. We are steeped in rugged individualism—pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, making it on our own, never letting someone see us sweat. Needing other people makes us feel, well, NEEDY! And we modern women do NOT want to feel needy! Yet God knows that we are; we need him and we need each other. Accept this reality. Honor it. The journey will be less arduous if we do.

Finally, hiking up Mt. Princeton with these high school students can teach us this: we all start the journey from different places, with different abilities and disabilities, and we all continue the journey at different paces. Where we are in the journey is just right for us. Accept this fact. Each journey is unique to each one of us. We can value our journey; we can value the journey of others. Comparing journeys will not help us; it will only make the journey more difficult. So accept the journey—and enjoy the hike!

Exercise #1

In your journal, write about your journey with Christ from the first stirrings of interest in God to where you are today. Note the times of easy travel and those of difficult travel. Write about the people who have accompanied you on your journey. How have they impacted the trip?

Exercise #2

Read **Critical Journey** by Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich. What phase seems to describe your life today? Are there places where you feel stuck? If so, what are they?

Persevere

I began running in 1978 and ran regularly and somewhat religiously until

my knees gave out in 2000. I loved running and miss it still today. Running was the easiest, quickest way to get good exercise no matter where I was. All I needed were running shoes, shorts, t-shirt and pavement so I could pack very little and hit the road running wherever I might be. Running was not only convenient, it was also the best way for me to be alone and clear my mind. Focusing on the simplicity of my stride, the cadence and depth of my breathing, and the details of my surroundings forced my mind away from any cares or worries, allowing it to take a breather and recharge.

The year 2000 was going to be my year to train for and attempt to run my first half marathon. Once I had completed that distance, I was going to begin training for a full marathon. I had good friends who had run several marathons and I had listened to the stories of their races for many years, learning vicariously what completing a 26.2 mile course involved. That spring I had even purchased a book—a veritable “everything you need to know about training for and running a marathon.” I was ready to begin—but God had other plans. I injured my knee running on a gravel road and in the process of diagnosing a medial meniscus tear, discovered that I had osteoarthritis in both knees and exposed bone in one. If I wanted to avoid being “bone on bone,” I would have to quit running immediately. My running days were over.

However, my research about training and running long distances as well as my years of running shorter distances has not been wasted; I have learned a lot about perseverance. The word “persevere” means “to persist in spite of difficulties.” All marathoners encounter difficulties; all marathon finishers have to find ways to persist in spite of them. What does it take to go the distance? What is needed in order to finish the race?

These are the truths I have learned. All long distance runners train. They start with shorter distances and work their way up to greater distances and increasingly longer time. They run in different conditions over varied terrain. In the process they find their individual pace, the rhythm that works best for them, and practice maintaining that pace over the day’s prescribed course. They experiment with and discover their unique nutritional needs—when to eat “good” carbs, when to eat protein, when to drink water, when to have a carb “jolt.” They learn to recognize early signs of exhaustion and in the process learn ways to push through and

overcome it. They try different shoes, socks, shorts, shirts, and all-weather gear and settle on those that work well for them. As they increase the lengths of their runs, they find the times and distances that give them difficulty. They may find that they frequently struggle at mile 13 or 17 or 21 and they put into place whatever they need to keep going at that point—a friend to run with them, an extra energy bar or drink, a cheering section—whatever will help. Bottom line: they do whatever it takes to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Before the actual race, they study the course, looking for the long uphill pulls, the straight-aways, and the downhill “breathers.” They make sure they know the weather report for race day—temperature, wind and precipitation forecast—from starting gun to finish line. On the morning of the race, they take their place in the great crowd of fellow runners, surrounded by noisy throngs, knowing that they are as ready to go as they can reasonably be. The excitement builds; the runners take their stances; the gun is fired; the crowd roars; and they run—settling into their pace, monitoring and replenishing their bodies, remembering what they have learned about the course, being encouraged by the cheering spectators and supporters along the way, and straining toward the finish. Most runners will confess that they have reached a point in some race when they want to quit; their bodies are hurting somewhere—a foot or knee or hip—or they are more winded and exhausted than they had expected to be. But they press on, putting one foot in front of the other until they overcome the desire to quit. They keep moving; they keep running. Then the last few meters are right in front of them. They see the finish line and they know they’ve made it. There is no greater feeling for such a runner as that of crossing the finish line—still upright and moving!

Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we’d better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how He did it. Because He never lost sight of where He was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he’s there, in the place of honor, right alongside God.

When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility He plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls! Hebrews 12:1-3, The Message

We are running the greatest race of all—the race already run and won by Christ, our Savior! The race already run and won by “all these veterans,” all these Jesus followers, all these saints who have gone before us. Paul (in Eugene Peterson’s words) tells us to “start running—and never quit!” Put one foot in front of the other, over and over again. Shed anything that weighs us down; confess the sins that suck the life out of us. Study how Jesus ran the race and train as He did. Run at the unique pace He has for us. Focus on the finish line, on the One who is waiting there with a huge smile and open arms, and run toward him with everything we have. When we find ourselves “flagging,” remember and remind ourselves again who He is and what He has done. Then take the next step and the next and the next and keep moving. Get on with it. Never quit. Persist in spite of difficulties—in spite of fatigue, discouragement, persecution, doubt, loss, and illness, whatever. Never quit. Run the race. Finish it. Persevere.

Exercise #1

Paul created a wonderful word picture when he used the metaphor of the race. Spend some time thinking about the correlations between a marathon and our journey with Jesus. Journal about the connections that are significant for you.

Exercise #2

Think about and answer these questions: What do I need along the way to help me keep running the race? Can I apply any of the suggestions and ideas from Spiritual Formation 102 to my particular race?

Exercise #3

Consider the ramifications of trying to run a marathon at the same pace you would run a 100 yard dash. How might a sprinter’s pace affect your life long spiritual journey?

Final Thoughts

When asked by Discipleship Journal “what keeps your relationship with God alive,” Eugene Peterson responded:

“The short answer is God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It took me a long time to start living this. I was immersed in a Christian culture that dumped advice on me nonstop about how to maintain a ‘vital’ relationship with God. And I did everything anybody told me to do. I got pretty good at it. But the better I got at it the more my relationship with God suffered.

Gradually I began to understand what the church had been teaching for centuries, namely, that it is God’s nature to seek us out and draw us into participation with what He is doing. I realized that He was a lot more interested in my relationship with Him than I was. I relaxed. I began to cultivate quiet, listening, and ordinary obedience. The less interested I became in ‘keeping my relationship with God alive,’ the more I was able to notice and participate in what God was doing to keep me in relationship with Him.”

The best parts of our journeys are the moments when we realize and remember that God is seeking us, God is truly much more interested in life-giving intimacy with us than we are with him. Learning to live his life within us, the life He is longing to live in and through us, is the greatest joy of the journey.

Our purpose for this course has been to “remember and remind us again” that encountering the risen Christ over and over again is what sustains us. As we pursue the meaningful kingdom work God has for each of us, let us keep our eyes on Jesus, keep our focus on the prize—Jesus himself. Let us take care of our souls to the best of our abilities by continually seeking his face. Let us not lose sight of the one whose love redeems, restores and consumes us.

Dwell with Jesus. Listen to his voice. Beware of the dangers. Accept the wonder and beauty of the journey. Persevere to the end.

Get to Know the Writer

Marcia Schultz expresses in many ways her passion to see others grow in love and knowledge of Christ. Her journey in ministry includes 11 years of private practice as a psychotherapist, 20 years in vocational ministry at Cherry Hills Community Church and a life-long talent for vocal music. As Assistant Pastor to Women at Cherry Hills Community Church in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, Marcia invests in spiritual leadership development and directs the Women of Influence mentoring program.

She holds a B.S. in nursing from the University of Colorado and an M.A. in counseling psychology from the University of Denver. Marcia has been married 37 years and has four children and two grandchildren.

For Further Reading: Spiritual Formation

Abba's Child, The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging

by Brennan Manning.

Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster

Desiring God by John Piper

Disciplines of Grace (from spiritual routines to spiritual renewal),

by T. M. Moore

Disciplines of the Inner Life

by Bob Benson, Sr. and Michael W. Benson

Experiencing Go by Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King

The Imitation of Christ by Thomas A. Kempis

The Insider by Petersen & Shamy

Listening to God (Using Scripture as a path to God's Presence)

by Jan Johnson

Love Walked Among Us (Learning to Love Like Jesus) by Paul E.

Miller

Prayer the Great Adventure by David Jeremiah

The Pursuit of God by A. W. Tozer

The Ragamuffin Gospel by Brennan Manning

Return of the Prodigal by Henri Nouwen

Sabbath by Wayne Muller

Shattered Dreams by Larry Crabb

Signature of Jesus by Brennan Manning
Soul Keeping by Howard Baker
Space for God by Don Postema
Spirit of the Disciplines by Dallas Willard
Spiritual Classics (selected readings for individuals and groups)
by Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith
Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life by Donald S. Whitney
What's So Amazing About Grace? by Philip Yancey